

# Notation Guide

No consistent rules can be applied when interpreting Ellington's manuscripts. Furthermore, the many subtleties of jazz can never be notated accurately: prescriptive notation limits freedom of interpretation. The performer is advised to study this guide and Ellington's recordings. Ellington seldom wrote accurate note durations, phrasing or dynamics. If all notes were played just as written – as though it were classic music - the result would likely be music that simply did not swing. Conversely, some modern jazz composers prefer to annotate scores in detail and write accurate note durations throughout. To avoid any confusion it is necessary to explain in some detail the system of notation used in these transcriptions.

Professionally jazz charts should avoid excessive annotation on the basis that the competent jazz musician appreciates how the music should be interpreted without having to read a cluttered manuscript. I follow that approach, and try to add as little annotation as possible to Ellington's orchestrations. To accommodate a wider audience I offer two editions of each transcription using different styles of notation.

## Standard Editions

This notation requires some interpretation of note duration and phrasing. A lot of Ellington's original writing is left unedited, unless significant changes are required beyond the expected level of interpretation. Dynamics, some phrasing and a few articulations have been added. These editions are targeted at orchestras with a moderate understanding of natural jazz phrasing. The notation provides clarity of rhythm but at the expense of some consistency of written note duration. It is hoped that most customers will be comfortable with the *Standard Editions*.

## Original Editions

This notation replicates Ellington's original note durations. There is little or no annotation - only what is found on the original manuscripts - usually meaning the complete absence of dynamics and phrasing. It is envisaged that only the serious-minded will tackle the *Original Editions*, as considerable analysis and interpretation is required to understand the notation and perform the music in an appropriate style.

## Rhythm Section Parts

Piano introductions and solos are transcribed as accurately as possible. Transcriptions of Ellington's backing figures may give an indication as to style. Beyond that, piano parts give chord progressions and occasional cues. Ellington never wrote parts out for himself except for his piano solo/trio pieces. The pianist may wish to develop his own interpretation using the transcription as a framework.

Bass parts may include written passages which should be deviated from only with discretion. Sometimes I provide a basic chord sheet as well as a fully transcribed part. Ellington's original bass parts were written as *think-bass* lines of notes on the first and third beats, mostly indicating mostly the harmonic roots, without chord symbols.

Guitar parts are provided only if present originally (in recordings before Fred Guy left in 1949). The parts are simple chord sheets with rhythmic figures added when appropriate. Ellington's guitar parts only featured the underlying harmonies without consideration of the transient harmonies in the ensemble. An unamplified guitar is advisable.

For percussion parts I avoid writing too much. The performer may wish to reproduce the 'military' swing style of Sonny Greer in earlier Ellington works. Greer feathered the bass drum on every beat, working on the hi-hat with plenty of articulation and with less use of ride cymbals than is common today. Up-tempo swing is typified by rim knocks on 2 and 4, or one-handed crush rolls or snare hits anticipating the 4<sup>th</sup> beat of alternate bars, and an individual style of crashes and splashes. Brushes were often used in up-tempo numbers.

## Solos

For all solos other than marathon improvisations, I present transcriptions of recorded solos as appendices to the band parts. Written solos are thus separated from the body of the music to allow whatever was originally written to be presented in situ to the musician.

Broadly speaking, solos belong to one of three categories:

- improvisations over the harmonic framework
- thematic statements with or without embellishment
- a feature solo throughout the majority of the composition

For fully improvised solos the original band parts often contained just the word *solo* (or *Boston*) over a blank staff. Thematic solos usually had the written melody for the musician to refer to, with or without chord symbols. In both these cases I always provide the chord symbols in situ and in the latter case the original written melody is presented unaltered. The musician then has the opportunity to study both the melody and the fully transcribed solo. Feature solos (e.g. *Frustration*) usually had a part stating the melody with or without chords, and other indications for improvised sections. For such pieces I provide two entirely separate parts for the feature instrument: the first replicating the original written part (but with chords, cues and other detail added where necessary), the second part a full transcription from a recording by the Ellington Orchestra.

Transcribed solos for multiple instruments may derive from different recordings of the pieces, the choice stemming from personal taste and ease of transcription. The solo transcriptions are not annotated in meticulous detail: it is better to refer to the recordings to understand the phrasing and style of the soloist.

## Section Leading

An interesting feature of Ellington's scores is how he often chose different musicians to lead their section in different circumstances, changing the colour of the section. An example is the trumpets in *Sherman Shuffle*. The third trumpet, Rex Stewart, leads the muted background figure instead of Wallace Jones, who later leads the entire brass ensemble. Similarly the lead sax would swap between Otto Hardwick and Johnny Hodges according to the colour and style of the figures in question. In other instances the reordering was solely for practical reasons: when he wanted a bass F in a trombone he had to assign the note to Lawrence Brown because Juan Tizol was using a valve trombone which was not capable of reaching a low F. Throughout the transcriptions I maintain the integrity of the original parts without indications of lead changes. The musicians can no doubt learn these or choose to reassign the parts as appropriate.

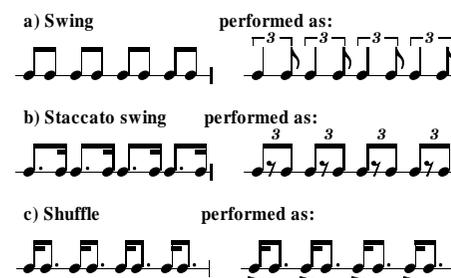
## Swing/straight rhythms

Quavers (eighth notes) are swung unless otherwise indicated. Swung beats approximate to the triplet rhythm shown in **Fig. 1(a)**, but at faster tempos the rhythm may tend towards even quavers. To indicate a staccato swing rhythm I have in most instances adopted the dotted rhythm of **Fig. 1(b)**, which Ellington himself used in earlier years, albeit not consistently. Occasionally the triplet with a centre rest may be written instead. Staccato dots are avoided, as these can lack visibility. The shuffle rhythm of **Fig. 1(c)** is often played with a strong emphasis on the beat. Rhythms to be played straight, not swung, may have text indications above or below the staff and may have an extended line, in the fashion of an *8va* marking, to show their scope. To indicate runs of accented, staccato straight quavers, both text and/or ^ accents may be used as appropriate; remember that such accents are not used to suggest a staccato swing rhythm.

## Phrasing and Annotation

In most melodic or rhythmic phrases every note should be articulated, but slurring may be appropriate in scalar or chromatic counterpoint, or in block harmonies (which Ellington labelled *organ* passages) of little rhythmic interest. Whilst rhythmic figures should be played in accented fashion, long notes should not be sustained at volume, rather played *fp*. The levels of attack and sustain are important to swing feel, and sustained long notes can overpower melodic lines in other instruments. An innate understanding of blues/jazz phrasing is assumed; there is then little need to over-annotate the transcriptions.

**Fig. 1: Swing rhythms**



Ellington only occasionally wrote phrase marks, and accents found in the original band parts were often added by the Ellington's sidemen for their own benefit. Sometimes Ellington's annotations do not reflect the recorded performances. In some cases I have altered or removed inconsistent annotations. Bends (notated as in **Fig. 2**), rips, falls, glissandos, portmanteau and shakes are added to the *Standard Editions*. These are often absent from Ellington's manuscripts. The *Original Editions* are mostly unannotated, showing only what Ellington wrote. Dynamics, phrase marks and slurs (or alternatively breath commas), have been added conservatively to the *Standard Editions* based on the recorded performances of the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

**Fig. 2: Lip bends**



## Dynamics

The original scores and parts never indicated dynamics. Dynamics in the *Standard Editions* are intended as relative indications only. An *mf* or *f* indication is used for most foreground passages, with *ff* used sparingly. Passages lying behind a soloist or other foreground part may be marked *mp*, but the absolute volume of such may vary considerably from piece to piece.

## Vibrato

Some bandleaders asked section musicians to play with synchronised vibrato, but Ellington wrote for individuals, not clones. Whilst unison passages should not have too much vibrato (Ellington would request a "dead tone" if he desired it), elsewhere a warm, individual vibrato should be employed by the reed section. Trumpets should use a little less vibrato and the more stately trombones should avoid it almost entirely. Ensemble slide vibrato is cheesy, as is an orchestra led by excessive trumpet vibrato.

## Mutes and the Pep Section

Plunger articulations are denoted by three markings: +, 0 and +0. The +0 marking is used for "wah" inflections on long or isolated notes. The text loose plunger or tight plunger indicates passages with a static plunger position. Ellington did not write plunger articulations on his scores: presumably they were memorised in rehearsal. Plunger articulations are, however, added to the *Original Edition* brass parts.

The *pep section* is a trio (usually two trumpets and trombone) employing a combination of pixie mute and plunger, an important part of Ellington's tonal palette. The notation for this is plunger/mute. Generally, every note of a pep section passage is articulated with a "wah" (or better, "yah"). A plunger without the pixie will not suffice. In his trombone solos, Joe Nanton used plunger and pixie (or trumpet straight mute) to vocalise "yah-yah" instead of "wah-wah", combined with growl effects. If possible, this should be attempted.

## Percussive Short Notes

The crotchet (quarter note) is normally a percussive short note of duration from one third to two-thirds of a beat, depending on tempo and style. Accents such as ^ are not employed to indicate short notes, as the overuse of these results in a cluttered manuscript. A general rule 'crotchets short, quavers long' usually applies. Crotchets are only played full-duration when marked with a *tenuto* or when under a phrase mark, slur or *legato* passage. An exception is the last note of a slurred or legato phrase, usually released earlier than its written duration indicates.

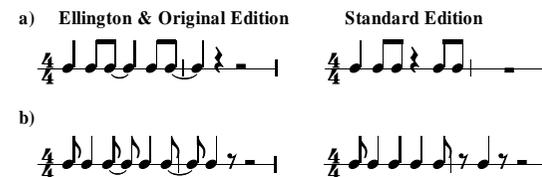
Off-beat percussive notes, such as the 2<sup>nd</sup> note in **Fig. 3**, are written as crotchets unless sensible rhythmic division of the bar dictates the use of a quaver. An off-beat note may linger a little into the beat it anticipates, especially at the end of a phrase, unless a more clipped style is demanded. **Fig. 3(a)** illustrates the interpretation at fast tempos or in a broad style. At slow/medium tempos, especially in more accented passages, both quavers and crotchets may be clipped shorter, as in **Fig. 3(b)**.

### Adapting Early Ellington

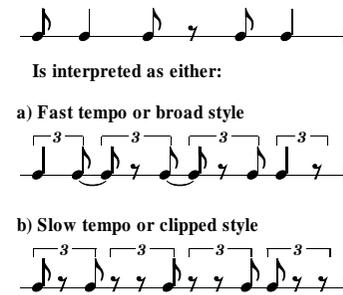
An important difference between the *Standard Edition* and *Original Edition* transcriptions lies in the use of crotchets tied to off-beat quavers in Ellington's earlier writings. With a written duration of one and a half beats such figures may actually indicated short notes but they cannot be distinguished from identical patterns which should be held for the full duration! This notation is little understood today, so the crotchets are removed from the *Standard Editions*, as indicated in **Fig. 4**.

Ellington used two tied quavers for short notes off the beat as in **Fig. 4(b)**, but this again prevents distinction between full-duration or short notes. Because placing tenuto marks over pairs of tied quavers would not be ideal, in the *Standard Editions* pairs of tied quavers will indicate a full-duration note, and short notes are written as crotchets or single quavers. In the *Original Editions*, quavers or crotchets tied to off-beat quavers may indicate either long or short notes. Again it is expected that a conductor come to his own conclusions with or without reference to the recordings.

**Fig. 4: Early Ellington notation**



**Fig. 3: Percussive Short Notes**

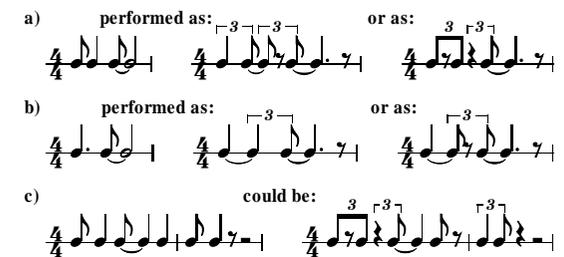


## Alternative Interpretations

The transcriptions do not explicitly differentiate between a clipped or broader style. Given that occasionally Ellington's performance style differed between multiple recordings of the same piece and that excessive annotation would be restrictive, it is expected that a conductor come to his own conclusions with or without reference to the recordings. As a further aid, **Fig. 5(a)** and **Fig. 5(b)** show further examples of broad and clipped styles. The second, clipped interpretation of the classic rhythm of **Fig. 5(a)** would be the preferred choice in a loud, percussive ensemble figure. A background figure in the saxophones, say, would be less percussive: the broader interpretation would be more likely.

Some figures contain mixtures of short and broad notes. **Fig. 5(c)** begins with the classic 3-note rhythm which could have either a broad or clipped style, but the first note of the 2nd bar is most likely to be broad, it being the last accented beat of the phrase and being followed by a "throw-away" off-beat note. In an *Original Edition* transcription the tied note in the middle of the 1st bar could either be short or long - the performers must agree on this between themselves, with or without reference to Ellington's recordings. If such a rhythm appears in a *Standard Edition* score it indicates a long note with no gap before the fourth beat.

**Fig. 5: Alternative Interpretations**



## Long Notes

Referring back to the minims of **Fig. 5(a)** and **Fig. 5(b)**, observe that is common to release longer notes before the end of the beat, especially those notes that terminate a phrase. There are generalised rules that apply to many rhythmic or percussive contexts throughout Ellington's music. Where longer notes are involved, Ellington seldom wrote short (e.g. quaver) rests between notes clearly intended to be separated. The result is clarity of rhythm but a need to interpret heavily.

For the different treatment of long notes, The Notation Guide broadly classifies figures as being *harmonic* or *rhythmic* in function. *Harmonic* figures may comprise a series of long block chords, often *legato*, with little rhythmic function and with perhaps only the occasional off-beat interjection. Ellington often labelled these as *organ* passages, especially when applied to background block harmonies in the reed section. A *Rhythmic* or *percussive* figure may be a countermelody or a series of percussive interjections and is often treated quite differently.

## Harmonic Backgrounds

Harmonic background figures will comprise a series of long block chords, played in a *legato* fashion, and mostly held to their full duration with the exception of the terminal note: this is always shortened. Isolated interjections are also released early: minims become dotted crotchets and semibreves become dotted or double-dotted minims. **Fig. 6** shows the *Standard Edition* notation for a trumpet/clarinet background figure from *Stay Awake*. The *Original Edition* is written without the slurs, as it appears in Ellington's score. In bars 3 and 7, the terminal semibreves become dotted (or double-dotted) minims. In bar 4, the isolated interjection is released early. The *Original Editions* do not have phrase marks; the performer can find the phrasing for himself with or without reference to Ellington's recordings.

**Fig. 6: Stay Awake, clar/trpt background**

a) Standard Edition notation

b) Interpretation

## Rhythmic or Percussive Figures

Rhythmic figures are often more percussive. Most notes are shorter and accented. The shortening of long notes ensures their separation, and this is vital to a swing feel. A series of fully sustained notes has much less impact than those with short gaps before each attack. **Fig. 7** depicts a trombone figure in the trombones in *Sherman Shuffle*. The *Standard Edition* notation is shown in **Fig. 7(b)**, interpreted as in **Fig. 7(c)**. The semibreve and minim are stopped early with the tongue. It is also common to shorten dotted crotchets such as the one here - refer to the alternatives of **Fig. 5(b)**. Recapping on Ellington's early style, observe in **Fig. 7(a)** the final anticipated beat with a crotchet tied to it. This is preserved in the *Original Editions* but the *Standard Edition* notation does away with the crotchet to conform to more modern practice.

**Fig. 7: Rhythmic figures**

a) Ellington's original notation

b) Standard Edition notation

c) Interpretation

## Brass versus Reeds

It can be observed that the reeds are often less percussive than the brass. In *Sherman Shuffle*, for example, the reed section has a background figure similar to that of **Fig. 7** behind Lawrence' Brown's solo. This is shown in **Fig. 8**. There is no way to determine

this from Ellington's manuscripts, so in the *Standard Edition* the figure is slurred to show that it is *legato*. If, however, a similar figure were being played by the combined brass and reeds it might well be played in a detached and more percussive fashion. There are no hard and fast rules.

## Mixed figures

As an example of a figure with mixture of melodic and percussive elements, **Fig. 9** shows the top line of a harmonised brass figure from *Frustration*. Bars 3-4 are rhythmic and percussive, dictating shortened, accented notes. The first bar, however, is melodic and should be played in a broad style, exactly as written. Observe that the general rule of terminal note-shortening is as usual applied to the semibreve in bar 2. This can be shortened to a dotted minim or a double-dotted minim.

**Fig. 9: Melodic and percussive combinations**

a) Standard Edition notation

b) Interpretation

**Fig. 8: Rhythmic figures - reeds**

a) Original

b) Standard Edition

Readers of the *Original Edition* transcription should observe the tied G-natural in bar 1 of **Fig. 8** is not a short note. *Frustration* was after Ellington mostly abandoned the system of tying redundant crotchets to anticipated percussive notes (see **Fig. 4**). In other words, the G-natural is intended to be played for its full written duration.

## Summary

I have attempted to create a set of transcriptions with standardised notation from source material spanning many decades, written in distinct styles before and after circa 1943, when Ellington altered his style of notation to something more like that used by modern composers. Many of the works by Duke Ellington that I have transcribed contain figures whose rules for note duration cannot be formalised consistently. The transcriptions are presented as unadulterated as possible, and I hope this notation Guide is a sufficient aid to interpreting and performing Ellington's music.